

Searching in the Trenches: Introducing U.S. Military Records

Millions of men and women served in the United States Armed Forces throughout American history. The U.S. Military has created many different types of records, including service files, pensions, bounty land warrants, and draft registrations. This presentation will introduce these four main record types, discuss key conflicts, and provide resources for finding military records.

History and Background

Five Military Branches:

- **Army** – Founded in 1775, the Army was originally known as the Continental Army. At the time, the army coordinated efforts of the thirteen colonies to fight against the British in the American Revolution.
- **Navy** – Founded in 1775, the Navy was initially called the Continental Navy. The Naval Act of 1794 established a permanent standing U.S. Navy.
- **Marine Corps** – Founded in 1775, a component of the U.S. Navy since 1834.
- **Air Force** – Started in 1907 as part of the U.S. Army. Military aviation was divided between the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. The Air Force was established as a separate branch of the military in September 1947.
- **Coast Guard** – The Revenue Cutter Service was established in 1790 and was responsible for dealing with smuggling and enforcing federal tariffs and trade laws. The Coast Guard was formally established in 1917.

Major U.S. Conflicts

- American Revolutionary War (1775-1783)
- War of 1812 (1812-1815)
- Mexican American War (1846-1848)
- Civil War (1861-1865)
- Indian Wars (1780s-1890)
- Spanish American War and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902)
- World War I (1917-1918)
- World War II (1941-1945)

Vocabulary

- Artillery – soldiers working with field pieces
- Cavalry – soldiers on horseback
- Infantry – soldiers on foot
- Regular – members of the regular armed forces
- Volunteer – militias raised by state governments during times of war
- Enlistment – to enroll in the armed forces
- Muster in – to begin military service
- Muster out – to discharge from service, often when a term of service is complete
- Discharge – leaving the military
- Furlough – official leave of absence
- AWOL (absent without leave) – absence without permission

Key Record Types

Draft Records

A draft registration (or conscription) identifies people who are eligible for military service. Only a certain number of those who register for the draft are called up for service. Draft registration records do not indicate an individual served in the military. Draft registration has been required for the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. The Selective Service and Training Act, passed September 1940, requires individuals of a certain age to register for the draft even today.

Draft records may include full names, ages, birthdates and places, family members, marital status, physical description, residence, occupation, prior military service, and more.

Service Records

In the 1890s, the Pension Office extracted information for Compiled Military Service Records (CMSRs) for volunteers serving in the Civil War using muster rolls, pay rolls, hospital records, descriptive rolls, and more. Eventually CMSRs were created for those who served in all major conflicts from 1775-1902. However, CMSRs were never compiled for regular army and navy units. In the 20th Century, Official Military Personnel Folders (OMPFs) were created for soldiers as they served.

Service records may include full names, ages, physical description, date, place, and residence at enlistment, date mustered in, date and place of discharge, unit information, details of illnesses and injuries, furloughs, court martials, and more.

Bounty Land Records

From 1776 through 1848, Bounty Land was offered as incentive for military service. Bounty Land during this time required a certain number of years of service or required service for the length of the war. Acreage depended on rank and land was set aside in specific locations. In 1850, 1853, and 1855, three Bounty Land Acts offered bounty land to any veteran (or their heirs) of any conflict since the American Revolution. Veterans (or their heirs) could claim up to 160 acres.

Bounty Land Warrant Applications may include names, regiments, service information, widow's maiden name, date and place of marriage, date and place of marriage, current and former residences, heirs, and more. Note that Bounty Land Warrants are filed with Land Entry Files.

Pension Records

Pensions provided a monetary benefit to disabled veterans, their widows, or minor heirs. Pensions were paid monthly or annually and were based on Congressional Acts. During or immediately following a conflict, pensions were usually offered only to those who were injured or lost their husband during the war. Later acts expanded benefits to all veterans.

Pension Files may include names, regiment, wounds incurred during service, current and former residences, death date and place, maiden name of spouse, marriage date and place, names of children, birthdates and places of children, former marriages, widow's second marriages and divorces, widow's death date and place, affidavits from neighbors or family members, migrations, original signatures, photographs, family bible pages, and more.

Determining Service

Did your ancestor serve in the military? In order to obtain records of your ancestor's service or pension, you will need to know the conflict in which they served and their unit. Start by considering their birthdate. Were they of age to have served in one of the major conflicts? The following table establishes the birth years for men who were age 18-30 and 16-60 for each major conflict:

YEARS	CONFLICT	AGE 18-30	AGE 16-60
1775-1783	Revolutionary War	b. 1745-1765	b. 1715-1767
1812-1815	War of 1812	b. 1782-1797	b. 1752-1799
1846-1848	Mexican American War	b. 1816-1830	b. 1786-1832
1861-1865	Civil War	b. 1831-1847	b. 1801-1849
1898-1902	Spanish American War et al	b. 1868-1884	b. 1838-1886
1917-1918	World War I	b. 1887-1900	b. 1857-1902
1941-1945	World War II	b. 1911-1927	b. 1881-1929

Next, identify clues in other types of records that may point to military service or identify their unit. Records which contain clues to military service include:

- Family records such as stories, letters, photographs (in uniform or with military insignia), memorabilia, or artifacts.
- Federal census records often include information about military service, including:
 - 1840 census lists Revolutionary War pensioners (including widows)
 - 1890 census included a separate schedule for Union Civil War veterans; schedules for the states of Kentucky (partial) through Wyoming still exist
 - The 1910 census asked if the individual was a survivor of the Civil War. Responses included Union Army (UA), Union Navy (UN), Confederate Army (CA), and Confederate Navy (CN)
 - The 1930 census asked if the individual was a veteran and if so, of what war
 - The supplementary questions for 1940 asked if the individual was veteran of the U.S. military or the wife, widow, or minor child of a veteran; if a child, asked if the veteran-father was deceased
 - The supplementary questions for 1950 asked whether the individual was veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces
- State census records may include questions about military service.
- County histories often list regiments which formed up in the county and may include a list of names of those who served in those regiments.
- Headstones for veterans often include their regiment and company.
- Obituaries may identify whether someone served in the military
- Newspapers often provide evidence of military service. The names of those drafted during World War I and World War II were often published in the local paper.

Finally, search indexes for those conflicts. Be careful! Many men of the same name served in each conflict. Review the records carefully to determine whether the soldier really is your ancestor.

Finding Military Records

Military records are primarily created by the Federal government. This means that most military records are held by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). NARA has multiple physical locations and branches around the country. Currently, all military records created before 1917 are housed at the National Archives in Washington D.C. Records created in 1917 or later are housed at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis Missouri. Records not held by the federal government include Confederate Pensions (individual states offered pensions to Confederate veterans) as well as

records of local militias and National Guard Units. These records are usually housed in individual State Archives.

Note that some military records have been lost. A fire in November 1800 in the War Department Building destroyed many Revolutionary War records, including early pensions. A fire in July 1972 at the National Personnel Records Center destroyed almost 80% of all Army and Air Forces Service Records for World War I and World War II.

Online Resources:

Many military records have been digitized and are available online. In addition, there are many indexes to military records that are also available online. Check out the following websites for records of information on military service:

Fold3.com (\$) – WWI and WWII draft registrations, some CMSRs files and indexes, Bounty Land Warrant Application indexes, Revolutionary War and War of 1812 Pension Files, Civil War Pension Files for widows (in process), Pension indexes, and so much more. <https://www.fold3.com>

Ancestry (\$) – WWI and WWII draft registrations, an index of Civil War Soldiers, Marine Corps Muster Rolls, Army Registers, Bounty Land Warrant Application indexes, Confederate Pension Files, application for military headstones, and more. <https://www.ancestry.com>

FamilySearch – WWI and WWII Old Man's Draft, indexes to War of 1812 and Mexican American War Service, indexes to Pensions for Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and Civil War, Confederate Pension Files, and more. <https://www.familysearch.org>

Daughters of the American Revolution Patriot Index – index to those who have been identified as patriots and for whom descendants can apply to join the D.A.R. See https://services.dar.org/Public/DAR_Research/search/?Tab_ID=1

Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Database – hosted by the National Park Service. The database can be accessed at <https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>

FamilySearch Research Wiki – The Wiki has many pages about military service and records in the United States. In addition, pages for many regiments from the Civil War have been created to connect soldiers with the counties from which they served. Search for “[state] in the Civil War” to get started. <https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki>.

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) – the National Archives has digitized many military records which can be found in the National Archives Catalog. <https://catalog.archives.gov/> NARA also has information describing military records and resources and where they are housed. <https://www.archives.gov/research/military> Also check out NARA's Archival Databases, including several related to military service. <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-list.jsp?cat=GP23>